

Floods: mould and your health

Community information

Mould is a type of fungi that lives on plant and animal matter. Mould grows best in damp, poorly ventilated areas and reproduces by making spores. When airborne mould spores land on damp spots indoors, they may begin to grow and spread.

There is no practical way to eliminate all mould indoors; the best approach is to control the source of moisture.

What does mould look like?

Mould is not always easy to recognise. It often looks like 'fuzz' or appears to be a stain, smudge or discoloration. The most common moulds are black, green or white. However, mould can be many other colours ranging from grey to orange to brown.

How does mould affect people?

Mould can trigger nasal congestion, sneezing, cough, wheeze and respiratory infections and worsen asthma and allergic conditions.

People with weakened immune systems, allergies, severe asthma or lung diseases are more susceptible to mould exposure.

Mould growth after flooding

Flooding, excess moisture and pooled water can cause mould growth in your home. This may be a health risk for you and your family.

When returning to your home after a flood, be aware of any visible mould or a musty smell. High mould levels are likely if the house has been flooded for more than two days.

To prevent mould growth, clean up and dry out the house as quickly as possible (within 48 hours).

Before you clean-up, remember that not everyone is suited to working in damp, potentially mouldy conditions.

The following people should avoid being present during post-flood cleaning or repair works:

- children (under 12 years, particularly infants)
- pregnant women
- people over 65 years of age
- those with weakened immune systems, allergies, severe asthma or lung diseases.

Assume your home is contaminated with mould when:

- it has been flooded for more than two days
- you can see mould
- there is water damage
- there are strong, musty odours.

The more extensive the contamination, the greater the risk of exposure during clean-up. Consider using professional cleaners if the affected area is large.

Seek advice from your insurance company before you start to clean-up, including the disposal of water or mould-damaged items.

What should I wear to protect myself from mould in a flooded home?

If you are visiting your house to collect belongings, inspect for damage or to do basic clean-up over short periods:

- wear sturdy waterproof footwear with rubber soles and rubber or leather gloves
- If you are particularly sensitive to mould exposure, wear a respirator

Cleaning up mould:

If you decide to remove the mould yourself, make sure there is good ventilation and wear protective clothing such as a shower cap, rubber gloves, eye protection,

overalls, suitable footwear and a P1 or P2 face mask (available from your hardware store).

For information on how to clean up and remove mould go to Mould removal at home at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Do not mix bleach with ammonia, acids or other cleaners – this can release hazardous chlorine or chloramine fumes. Read product labels before use.

Steps to minimise mould after a flood

1. Remove all sources of pooled water and excessive moisture from the home.
2. Remove all wet or flood-damaged items, including wallpaper, plasterboard, carpet, rugs, bedding, mattresses, furniture, stuffed toys, clothing and other materials that cannot be properly dried or cleaned.
3. Remove wet wall lining (plasterboard) to allow for proper drying out of internal wall spaces.
4. Remove all soft or absorbent materials with mould growth.
5. Temporarily store damaged or discarded items outside the home, in a safe, clean, dry place such as a shed or garage, until your insurance claim is processed.
6. Clean and disinfect all surfaces inside the house, including floors, walls, the kitchen, bathroom and laundry.
7. Allow the house to dry throughout.

Drying out the house after a flood

When returning to your home after a flood, open the doors and windows to air out the house. Once reliable,

safe power is restored, use fans and dehumidifiers to dry out the house.

Air-conditioning or central heating should not be used if damaged or contaminated by floodwater. If you suspect contamination, do not use until they are cleaned and checked by a qualified person.

To prevent carbon monoxide poisoning

Never use a:

- portable power generator indoors. Do not locate inside a home, garage, carport, basement, crawlspace or other enclosed or partially enclosed area, even with ventilation. Opening doors and window will not prevent the build-up of carbon monoxide and other fumes indoors.
- pressure washer or any fuel-powered engine inside a basement, garage or other enclosed structure, even if the doors or windows are open, unless the equipment is professionally installed and vented.
- gas stove or oven to heat a home.
- charcoal grill, hibachi, lantern or portable camping stove inside a home, tent or caravan.

Further information

- If you or anyone in your family feels unwell, seek medical advice from your local doctor or call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on 1300 60 60 24 for health information and advice.
- For further information and help, contact the environmental health section of your local council.

Information on mould and your health go to the [Better Health Channel](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) <www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>

To receive this document in another format, phone the Environment Section Health Protection on 1300 761 874, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or [email the Environment Section](mailto:environmental.healthunit@dhhs.vic.gov.au) at <environmental.healthunit@dhhs.vic.gov.au>.

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